■ Whitney Museum of American Art

MECHANICAL ILLUSIONS BY ROBERT CUMMING

■ July 17–October 19, 1986

An art work for me is a number of things; an out-loud (objectified) speculation, an answer to the rhetorical questions of the physical universe, a personal antidote to the chaos of the world and finally, a gesture of interpretation and good will to my fellow humans in hopes that these intuitive inventions may somewhere generate a small degree of enlightenment. I depict objects usually; they're my vehicle. Strung together over the years, they've been my tickets of passage.

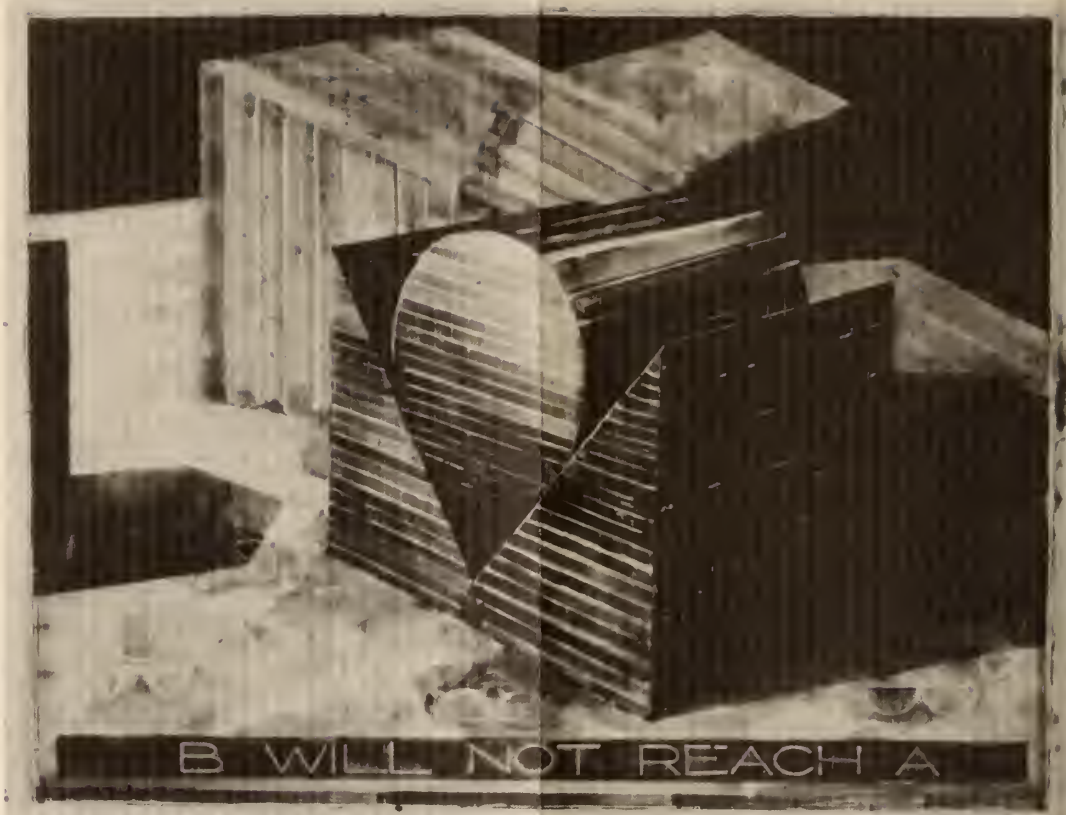
Robert Cumming, 1974

■ **This exhibition is sponsored by a grant from the Lobby Gallery Associates.**

Left Zone, Rite Zone, 1986

■ In the nearly twenty years since he left graduate school with a master's degree in photography, Robert Cumming has explored the guises of reality and the significance of illusion in a range of materials and forms. Working in sculpture, prints, drawings, and photographs, Cumming's style remains that of a sophisticated tinkerer. His peculiar and fecund imagination fuels a steady production of things, and behind it all one senses a singular artist—bemused, skeptical, inquisitive, always willing to fabricate his wry fantasies. Cumming's repeated use of certain architectural and mechanical images is evident in this survey, as is his technical prowess. Obviously, he does what he does well. But why he chooses to do "it" is less clear. Although much of what he has made incorporates humor, Cumming's pieces are more than funny. They are, as he puts it, "objectified speculations." Their source seems located in a matrix of language and perception, personal meaning and universal understanding, appearance and fact. With an authority and fluency that increases with time, Cumming has created a body of work that revolves around these dualities, occasionally exaggerating their discrepancies, but finally accommodating them.

Cumming is a native of the Boston area and studied sculpture there at the Massachusetts College of Art. His fundamental attraction to physical things prompted countless drawings of imaginary machines and mechanical landscapes from his earliest art school days. He recalls visiting construction sites to gather substantiating details for this genre of work, exemplified by the combined science fiction-Piranesi look of the drawing *First Generation* (1965). Cumming completed his undergraduate work that year and began graduate studies at



B Will Not Reach A, 1984

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the University of Illinois, mostly with the documentary photographer Art Sinsabaugh. He continued making sculpture, but the relentless detail possible in photography strongly appealed to him, as did the apparatus of the camera. Cumming used photography to document his three-dimensional work of this period, continuing to acquire sculptural skills—metalworking, woodworking—after finishing graduate school and moving to Milwaukee in 1967. As photography assumed a larger role in his work, he began using an 8 × 10 view camera. But it was by means of the then-current mail art movement, an aesthetic that elevated anything its practitioners were able to send through the postal system to the status of art, that Cumming made a name for himself among the aficionados of this democratic Dada. Works on paper from this time, such as *Large Grass* (1968), show Cumming formalizing and flattening out his visions. In this case he superimposes a mechanical regularity on nature, a theme he developed in many of his later drawings.

As an avid mail art artist, Cumming discovered he liked writing. His natural talent for narrative has since led him to write and publish five books illustrated with his drawings and photographs. It is not surprising, then, that his first large public piece, *Sentence Structure* (1970), literally exploited the written system of ordering thought. At the invitation of the Walker Art Center, Cumming conceived a huge sculpture of diagrammed sentences. A block-long structure of wooden lines and letters was constructed on a vacant lot in Minneapolis, using twenty sentences he had written. This fascination both with the act of writing and the magic of words underlies later sculptures such as *Large Pen* (1976) and *Lacks Parallax* (1976). It is amplified in the odd, sometimes enigmatic titles which Cumming incorporates into the drawings.

In 1970 Cumming moved again, this time to the Orange County suburbs of Los Angeles. Photography had now come to absorb most of his energies—sculpture was gradually subordinated to pictorial projects, in the form of props and fabrications for Cumming's narrative-conceptual photographs. The diptych *Of Eight Balls Dropped on the Peak of the Roof, Two Fell to the East, Six to the North* (1974) is typical. Cumming built and then photographed a small wall as a backdrop for this Newtonian "experiment," manipulating the negative and adding four wire-suspended balls to the image on the right. This kind of elaborate simulation was inspired in part by Cumming's keen interest in the studio stills sold in the Hollywood movie memorabilia shops he frequented. His small backyard and two-car garage became his own version of a stage, and he there made dozens of photographic constructs—often photographing the set-up in its miniaturized entirety to record its artificiality.

This photographic work attracted considerable critical attention throughout the 1970s and Cumming was touted as an important California Conceptualist. But the simplistic image-word correlation in his photographs and his obsessive attention to detail (especially background detail) set his pictures apart from the more linguistically oriented Conceptualists with whom he was often grouped. He continued making things; his abiding interest in craftsmanship and materials prompted infrequent and mostly utilitarian sculptural output through this period. Few other Conceptual artists, for instance, would have bothered making the dual

Submarine Cross-Section (from "Gray Lady Down"), 1977

purpose *Two Easel-Chairs* (1976), let alone attempt to patent them. Cumming's sensibility demanded a sensual realization extraneous to Conceptual art.

Cumming's sojourn in California came to an end in 1978 after he completed a yearlong project of photographing stages and backlots at Universal Studios. From these negatives he produced portfolios of photographic prints in handcrafted presentation boxes. In photographing such scenes as *Submarine Cross-Section (from "Gray Lady Down")* (1977), Cumming could have felt a monumental sense of déjà-vu: these complex filmic constructions magnified thousands of times the small-scale illusions of *Eight Balls* and other black-and-white diptych photographs of the mid-1970s. Cumming lovingly captures every detail of these Hollywood dream machines. In a sense, he was repeating the aide-mémoire photographs of his student years in Boston, while these images from the Universal Studio portfolio would feed drawings yet to come.

Cumming left California for northern Connecticut in 1978, a move that engendered changes both in his chosen subjects and his working methods. Natural fragments—stumps, leaves, and water—entered his repertoire. An illustration for his book of the same name, *Equilibrium and the Rotary Disc* (1978), elevates a common New England appliance, the water wheel, to a mythic realm, investing its movement with implications of critical balance. The humorous implausibility of the earlier photograph *Circular Saw Cuts 36" Radius* (1974) is converted here to a richer and more significant image. Cumming's need for more tactility meant that photography gave way to drawing. The hieroglyphic stream-of-consciousness ink sketches that had previously generated many of the sculptures became miniature scenarios suitable for enlargement into independent drawings.

Jack-Knife Boy (1980) is the first example of Cumming's reprise of drawing. The image is enlarged and perfected from an earlier sketch sheet: it typifies one strain of Cumming's imaginings—the anthropomorphic aspects of many of his "machines." *Worksheet for Molar Mark* (1981) takes this connection even further, proposing an interchangeability between human teeth and the keys of a typewriter. Here and in other pieces from this time Cumming's impulse to schematize makes a mechanical "order" out of the anatomy.

Cumming's drawings are often his means to make social commentary, however obliquely. *Monuments Made Sense* (1982), for instance, has a beehive and a large ordinance shell at either end of the seesaw, with the bomb outweighing the hive. A bottle of splashing fluid—perhaps ink—teeters at the fulcrum. Titling the implicit struggle in the past tense enigmatically suggests a newfound despair: the chaos and destruction of the bomb wins out over the order and well-being of the hive. In the face of this socio-political folly, Cumming turns inward to create a wholly imaginary, and more optimistic, universe—one of Lilliputian industriousness, as exemplified in *City on Coal* (1983).

In this group of works Cumming simultaneously adopts a larger format and gives freer rein to his fantasy. In *B Will Not Reach A* (1984) he positions abstracted symbols for each letter so that B is atop A, in a suspended tension, for the shapes can never interlock. In contrast, constructive connections are possible in the literal bridging of works such as *Freight by Floating Span* (1983). The chair as a symbol of human-mechanical harmony has been important to Cumming since his *Two Easel-Chairs*. Chairs also function as architectural surrogates—architecture by one definition being a "machine

for living"—in large drawings like *Awning Ascension Seat* (1984) or the more recent and fantastic *Floors and Ceilings* (1986).

The mechanical landscapes that fascinated Cumming as an art student are revived and considerably refined in the mysterious *Left Zone, Rite Zone* (1986). In it, small para-machines and decorative fragments are strewn across what appears to be a lunar landscape. The related photographs of high technology sites like *LESOC Satellite: Lincoln Labs, Lexington, Massachusetts* (1986), which Cumming took last year at M.I.T.'s invitation, show how symbiotic his photographs-sculpture-drawings are, and how constant have been his impressions and renderings of mechanical illusions.

Richard Armstrong Adjunct Curator

Of Eight Balls Dropped on the Peak of the Roof, Two Fell to the East, Six to the North, 1974

■ Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width precedes depth.

First Generation, 1965
Ink on paper, 18 × 20
Collection of the artist

Large Grass, 1968
Ink on paper, 22 × 30
Collection of Edward Jankowski and Ann Tickner

Black and White Rope Trick, 1973
Two black-and-white photographs, 8 × 10 each
Private collection

Circular Saw Cuts 36" Radius, 1974
Black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10
Private collection

Of Eight Balls Dropped on the Peak of the Roof, Two Fell to the East, Six to the North, 1974
Two black-and-white photographs, 8 × 10 each
Private collection

Lacks Parallax, 1976
Wood, metal, and paper, 18 × 35 × 11
Collection of Catherine and David Partridge

Large Pen, 1976
Wood and metal, 11 × 57 × 7
Collection of Catherine and David Partridge

Two Easel-Chairs, 1976
Wood and metal parts, 56 × 44 × 17
Collection of the artist

Drugstore and Street (from "The Great Gift"), 1977
Black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10
Castelli Graphics, New York

Shark Fin Atop Underwater Pneumatic Fin (from "Jaws II"), 1977
Black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10
Castelli Graphics, New York

Snow Scene Under Construction (from "It's a Wonderful Life"), 1977
Black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10
Castelli Graphics, New York

Submarine Cross-Section (from "Gray Lady Down"), 1977
Black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10
Castelli Graphics, New York

Energy Transforms Matter, 1978
Two black-and-white photographs, 8 × 10 each
Collection of the artist

Equilibrium and the Rotary Disc, 1978
Scratchboard, 8 × 10
Collection of Richard Menschel

Saws Ascent—Stumps Drop, 1978
Black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10
Castelli Graphics, New York

Impossible Arc, 1979
Polaroid photograph, 20 × 24
Collection of the artist

Two Plugs at an Outlet, 1979
Polaroid photograph, 20 × 24
Collection of the artist

Jack-Knife Boy, 1980
Charcoal on paper, 26 × 40
Collection of the artist

Worksheet for Molar Mark, 1981
Charcoal on paper, 26 × 40
Collection of the artist

Worksheet for Shelter, 1981
Charcoal on paper, 26 × 40
Collection of the artist

Monuments Made Sense, 1982
White ink on black paper, 22 × 32
Castelli Graphics, New York

City on Coal, 1983
Acrylic on paper, 41 × 53
Collection of N.S. Schweber

Freight by Floating Span, 1983
Acrylic on paper, 53 × 68
Collection of N.S. Schweber

Sun Dial, 1983
Acrylic on paper, 41 × 53
Burdge, Daniels and Associates, New York

Awning Ascension Seat, 1984
Acrylic on paper, 60 × 76¾
Collection of John Spencer

B Will Not Reach A, 1984
Acrylic on paper, 60 × 76
The Standard Oil Company, Cleveland

Complex Compass, 1984
Acrylic on paper, 60 × 76
Goldman, Sachs and Company, New York

Water Above, Water Below, 1985
Acrylic on paper, 60 × 77
Security Pacific Corporation, Los Angeles

Apex-Oculus, 1986
Acrylic on paper, 76 × 60
Castelli Graphics, New York

Floors and Ceilings, 1986
Acrylic on paper, 77 × 60
Castelli Graphics, New York

Inside "Constance"; Plasma Fusion Experiment, MIT, 1986
Color photograph, 16 × 20
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Permanent Collection

Left Zone, Rite Zone, 1986
Acrylic on paper, 60 × 77
Castelli Graphics, New York

LESOC Satellite: Lincoln Labs, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1986
Color photograph, 16 × 20
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Permanent Collection

Satellite Model in Earth-Orientation Sphere: Lincoln Labs, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1986
Color photograph, 16 × 20
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Permanent Collection

X-Ray Crystallography Mounts (DNA Molecule Experiments): Rich Labs, MIT, 1986
Color photograph, 16 × 20
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Permanent Collection

I am grateful to all the lenders to this exhibition, particularly to Castelli Graphics, for their generosity and assistance; Claudia Jolles for her research help; and Robert Cumming, who answered every question with characteristic candor, thereby provoking many others.

R.A.

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